

You shall make known to them the path in which they should go and the deeds that they should do. (18:20)

Haderech yeilchu bah, “The path in which they should go.” *Yeilchu*, “they should go,” is a reference to visiting the sick. By virtue of simply “going” to visit someone who is ill, even if he does nothing, the individual has already fulfilled the *mitzvah*. What is it about simply visiting that provides *mitzvah* fulfillment? Obviously, the optimum *mitzvah* is spending time, talking. Calming the patient--encouraging and engendering hope -- is what the patient needs, but the *mitzvah* at its basic is fulfilled merely with a visit. Perhaps by understanding the immediate consequences of illness we can better comprehend why visitation in its basic form is a *mitzvah*.

Illness punctures our self-established defenses which conceal the fact that: we are vulnerable to fear; we are really weak and powerless; and, above all, we are alone. One who is a prisoner to his hospital bed is a victim of profound loneliness. He has time to think, and the thoughts that course through his mind are often far from positive. People may claim that they need no one, but no one wants to be alone. Everyone seeks a connection with someone. No Jew is ever alone, he is a member of a community, a *shul*, a school, a *chabura*, a group. When he is alone in the hospital and all of his friends are out in the world living their lives, talking about their future plans – the patient feels terribly alone.

People must make the patient feel that others still care about him. Out of sight – out of mind is sadly a reality. Ask anyone who has been a patient alone in a hospital. *Bikur Cholim* means visiting the sick. When one enters the room of a sick person, he is conveying a message: “You still matter. You are still connected to your friends. No one has forgotten about you.” By helping him to conquer his loneliness, we are fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *Bikur Cholim*.

Bikur Cholim is an act of *chesed* and, as such, demands that the benefactor identify with the beneficiary. In the case of *Bikur Cholim*, this means that we must understand as best as possible the meaning of loneliness. How does it feel to be all alone? Some of us have *Baruch Hashem* never experienced that feeling; thus, fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *Bikur Cholim* takes on a new challenge. I must convey to the sick person that I know what you are going through and I feel your loneliness. In that way, the patient will not feel that “they are just visiting me to ease their conscience. They do not know what I am going through. They are clueless concerning my loneliness.” If we can psyche ourselves up to understanding the meaning of being a prisoner in a hospital bed, alone at night and most of the day, with no one to share the patient’s personal emotions, then we can properly fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Bikur Cholim*.